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AUTHOR Brown, Gillian
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ABSTRACT

As second language teaching moves away from traditional graded exercises to instruction in which communicative competence is the primary focus, exercises have become practice- and task-based, and systematic grading and diagnostic testing have disappeared. Students are sometimes being asked to perform tasks with which they would have difficulty in their own language. At the same time, the notion that the teacher can construct exercises based on theoretical principles to help with specific student skill deficiencies has been lost. However, in English language teaching (ELT) as in other disciplines, the teacher's role should be to influence learning. If the profession is shifting to a paradigm based on students cooperating in performing tasks, the tasks should be organized according to conceptual and technical difficulty. It is essential that teachers have a clear understanding of what success in a particular task consists of, including the ability to break the task down into component parts and then construct simple and intermediate versions of the same tasks so students having difficulty can make progress within a truly graded syllabus. It is time that instructional materials writers and teachers took a more professional view of this important area of methodology. A brief bibliography is included. (MSE)

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1. Grading and professionalism in ELT

Gillian Brown

University of Essex

1 THE LANGUAGE TEACHER'S ROLE IN THE COMMUNICATIVE SYLLABUS

With the move away from what Howatt (1984) calls 'the Hornby era', from language syllabuses which are based primarily on graded grammatical exercises with steadily increasing vocabulary, to syllabuses which are based on a view that the important thing about learning a language is to be able to use it to communicate with, there has arisen increased concern with how to provide environments in which students can actually communicate - where 'communication' means what it normally means in human experience, that is, that you have a speaker who has something he wants to say for a particular purpose to a listener who, the speaker feels, ought to hear what he has to say. So, to set up a communicative situation you need:

- 1) a speaker who wants to communicate a message for a purpose;
- 2) a listener who needs the information which the speaker has;
- 3) information which the speaker has and the listener has not.

I have talked about 'information' which needs to be transferred, and in general that is what I want to talk about here. I shall be ignoring, then, a very important part of language use: the use of language to establish and maintain social relationships - the patterns of greetings, farewells, desultory chat, whose primary purpose is to oil the social wheels rather than to transfer information. Suppose two friends go into a waiting room, and are overwhelmed by a blast of cold air as they go in. If they produce the following exchange:

A: Gosh, it's cold in here.

B: It's certainly cold in here.

they can hardly, in any normal sense, be said to be exchanging information which one has and the other doesn't have. Their primary concern is not to inform each other, but to maintain a comfortable togetherness, a feeling of viewing the world from the same perspective, of basic agreement about how the world is. The importance of this area of language use cannot be overstated from a social point of view. My concern, however, is with teaching students to control information-bearing language. I am concerned,

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then, only with part of the spoken language syllabus, and indeed, within the general area of information-bearing language only with that part which is designed to help a student transfer a quite complex piece of information, and which requires the ability to string a number of utterances together into a long turn.

Within the communicative approach, the overwhelming shift in teaching methodology is towards the control of information transference within a task-based approach. Here the communicative set-up can be a genuine one - a speaker has some information which the listener needs in order to complete a task. The speaker is motivated to speak, and the listener is motivated to listen because they both want to complete the task successfully. We witness an astonishing range of inventions poured into the construction of attractively packaged materials which will motivate students to produce and understand language in an ecologically rational way. In theory at least we then have classes of motivated students happily communicating away with each other, and teachers who happily witness this busy communication taking place, and whose only contribution is to supply the odd lexical item or grammatical structure at the moment when a student actually needs it - an ideal situation for a teacher, one might think.

Note that in this scenario a number of well-established notions in language teaching have apparently disappeared. We have lost the notion of the systematic grading of materials - this notion is apparently viewed as one which related to the grading of grammatical structures in the old structural syllabuses, but which can hardly be usefully applied within a communicative syllabus. Most courses on the market still claim to present 'graded' materials, but the authors don't specify what their principles of grading are - and careful study of the sequence of materials usually fails to reveal any principle of grading. Mentioning 'grading' seems to be just a bob to appeasing some half-forgotten pre-historic god.

Just as 'grading' has disappeared, so apparently, has the notion of 'diagnostic testing' - the construction of tests which would enable teachers to determine what their pupils were having difficulty with, in order that the teacher could develop exercises which would address that particular problem, and so help the student to do better.

Not only has the notion of diagnostic testing as a systematic tool of enquiry disappeared, so also has the notion that the teacher controls professional knowledge which could allow her to help a student who is having problems in learning a language in the context of a communicative syllabus. That is to say: if a pupil has difficulty in performing a task adequately, the teacher is not provided with any theoretical basis which could help her to help

the student perform better next time round. All the teacher can do is give the student more and more practice, in the hope that the student will cotton on to whatever problem he has, and solve his problem by himself. The only direct help the teacher can give is to suggest particular words, or structures, which the student might have found helpful in the present case, to hope he will remember them, and that they will come in useful again.

Under the new regime, the role of the teacher has dramatically changed. Thirty years ago, the professional teacher of English as a foreign/second language knew a great deal about the structure of the English language. She knew how to grade the presentation of syntax and lexis so that students encountered simple structure first, and only gradually moved on to encounter more difficult structures. She knew how to test what structures the student had acquired. She knew, within the bounds of the paradigm, how to construct exercises to help the student master structures he had difficulty with. She knew how to assess how well the student performed in relatively well-understood test formats. Today, the teacher often knows very much less from a professional point of view, particularly about the structure of the language, and it is considered acceptable in many current teacher training courses to ignore old-style testing, since we no longer believe that learning structures is what language learning is about. The teacher's professionalism is now seen to lie in providing a satisfactory structure to the classroom environment; in selecting or constructing interesting and motivating tasks which will give the student the opportunity to use the foreign language in a purposeful way; and in providing relevant vocabulary and grammatical structures as and when the students need them. Professionalism is now judged to lie in the ability to run a good class - one that is socially cheerful and cohesive -, to be familiar with and to have opinions about the range of materials available, and to know what works well in the classroom. In the context of the communicative syllabus it seems appropriate that it is the teacher's social skills which are professionally valued.

Note, however, that any teacher, in any subject area, requires that same professional expertise. A good mathematics class, just as much as a good language class, requires the same sort of professional input from the teacher to secure an environment in which learning is encouraged. It seems clear that any professional teacher needs a rather similar input in terms of the psychology of learning, the management of social interaction, and so on. What, then, does the professional teacher of English command as professional knowledge which distinguishes her from the professional teacher of mathematics? For the teacher of English, what technical knowledge is equivalent to the technical knowledge of the teacher of mathematics? Clearly, it is not enough to say that the teacher of

English knows English, since the teacher of mathematics may also know English.

As we all know, there is a tendency abroad these days to suggest that language teachers do not significantly affect the learning of a foreign language by the average adolescent in the classroom - a view particularly associated with Krashen (1981, 1982) and researchers interested in his views (Ellis 1984, for instance). The language teacher is seen rather as an accomplished scene-setter who sets a scene in which her students will start acquiring their target language, given 'motivation and comprehensible input' (Corder 1967). This seems to be increasingly interpreted as implying that there really is no way in which the teacher can assist the student to progress more rapidly. The teacher and the student can only co-operate to provide a rich context in which the student's language acquisition device may be automatically activated.

A number of established EFL teachers and scholars have argued against the apparent abandonment of the teacher's traditional role as the authoritative professional who on the one hand controls the matter which the students need to learn, and on the other hand provides the student with suitably graded materials, professionally chosen. Recent papers, for instance Brumfitt (1985), Strevens (1984), Swan (1985) and Widdowson (1985), have made these sorts of points forcefully. I wonder, though, if the new orthodoxies are not being too strongly stated. If we compare the teaching of a language with the teaching of mathematics, we have in both cases a rich symbolic system where it is necessary to learn the forms in the system and the possible relations holding between these forms. It is also necessary to learn to recognise occasions of appropriate application. Is the learning of a language necessarily so different from learning mathematics? (I am assuming here, of course, that 'learning mathematics' means 'learning to do mathematics', and not 'learning about mathematics', which is a different sort of activity.)

It seems clear that mathematics teachers need to be able not only to DO mathematics, but also to KNOW ABOUT mathematics, so that they can explain why a particular application is wrong on a particular occasion. It seems to me equally clear that a professional teacher of English needs to know about English in order to be able to make a professional assessment of the the difficulties her students experience, and in order to be able to devise exercises to help her students select an appropriate form on a particular occasion. It may be that the teacher cannot force the student to learn the form, but no-one has yet said she cannot help the student to use it appropriately. It is not enough for a teacher of English simply to be able to use English herself, she also needs, in a technical sense, to know about English. The first requirement for a

professional teacher of English must be that she knows about the formal structures of English - semantic, syntactic, morphological, phonological and graphical - and the discoursal use of those forms. It seems extraordinary that in the mid 1980s it is still necessary to reiterate arguments which were being made 30 years ago, when professionalism in EFL was first developing.

2 PROFESSIONALISM AND GRADING

There is also, it seems to me, a further area where one might expect professionalism from a language teacher. And it is one which again stresses the professionalism of the teacher's role in developing the students' experience of the target language. In most areas of teaching, a fundamental principle is the principle of grading, in the sense that the student is required to do easier, simpler tasks before he does more difficult ones. In learning to play the piano, it is easier for most pupils to learn to control the movements of one hand at a time before they try with two hands together. In learning to sew, one begins with plain stitches. In learning arithmetic one learns to add small numbers to begin with. Can it be the case that in teaching a foreign or second language, we can afford not to pay attention to this fundamental teaching principle?

If we accept that it would be good pedagogical practice to present easier material before more difficult material, we then have to determine what it is that's easier or more difficult. Although we no longer set out to teach language structures directly, it does seem as though materials writers use shorter less complex structures in beginners' courses, and only allow in really complex structures in advanced courses. To some extent, the heritage of all the work done on grading of linguistic structures in the context of the structural syllabus is still with us, though blurred. What else might we grade? It seems to me that if we are shifting into a paradigm that is based on students co-operating in performing tasks, we ought to have a good analytical grasp of what are easy tasks, what are more difficult tasks, and why.

There are some teachers who would argue that grading doesn't matter because a good teacher can make any material, any task, accessible to any learner. It is true that some talented teachers find this a particularly interesting challenge and they often are impressively successful, particularly with the top twenty percent of the ability range in the class, generally the group the teacher likes working with best. Even with teachers like this, I think there are two arguments against this position:

a) the perceptive student is usually quite well aware that he has only experienced the material which is actually too

difficult for him in a rather limited way - if he were presented with the same materials on another occasion he would probably still have difficulties with them;

b) it would seem sensible for the teacher to choose simpler materials in the first place, since they require less effort to make accessible to the student, and the student emerges feeling more confident of being able to manage on his own.

The arguments for using graded materials include at least the following points:

a) if a student encounters an easier task first, he has a greater chance of success in the task (Brown, Anderson, Shillcock & Yule 1984);

b) if the student finds that task easy to succeed in, and the teacher knows what constitutes a more difficult task, the student can appropriately proceed to the more difficult task;

c) if the student has difficulty with the easy task, and the teacher has some analysis of where the problems in the task lie, the teacher can diagnose the student's problem and give him specific practice in overcoming that type of problem before he proceeds to a more difficult task;

d) if the teacher knows that a particular task has been developed to promote a particular skill, the teacher can make a judgement about whether or not, or how far, the student is successful with respect to that skill.

In fact, as soon as we seriously reintroduce the concept of grading, we recapture also those other notions which we used to find in language teaching: the ability of the language teacher to construct diagnostic tests to look for difficulties, and the professional ability of the teacher to diagnose a student's problems and to take steps to help him.

What I am suggesting then is this: if we are going to use a task-based methodology in our teaching, then we need to take the notion of TASK seriously. We need a proper analysis of task types and what is required to succeed in performing a task.

3 GRADING AND ANALYSING THE CONTENT OF TASKS

If we want to be able to grade tasks in order of difficulty we have to be able to analyse them, to find out what they consist of. In order to find out what a task consists of we need to have a clear notion of what 'success in performing a task means'.

Suppose we have a task where one student (A) has a picture of a fort in front of him and he has to tell a second student (B), who can't see A's instructions, how to construct this fort from the pile of toy bricks which B has in front of him. Now, one measure of success would be whether or not B succeeds in building a fort that looks like A's picture. Note that B's success in building the fort would arise not simply from A's instructions, but from B's ability to understand what A is saying, however poorly A is expressing himself, together with B's ability to guess quickly what sort of structure it must be that he is supposed to be building. 'Success' in this sense would give the teacher no insight into what particular problems of expression A might have or what particular problems of comprehension B had - 'success' (or partial failure) would have to be globally attributed to the pair of them. All that we can hope from a task specified in terms of co-operative pair end-product is that it gives the pair an opportunity to practise some sort of speaking and understanding in the foreign language. It doesn't give us any analysis of what problems either of them might have.

We could however give the same task and specify 'success' in a different way. We could tape what A says and then analyse the tape with him and B, in order to see for instance whether A is using spatial expressions like 'to the left of', 'on top of', 'behind', etc, appropriately. We could look to see whether B interpreted the expressions appropriately. 'Success' would then be seen as either producing or understanding spatial terms appropriately. The same task could also be used as an exercise in using colour terms appropriately, if the bricks were all of different colours. The same task could be used as an exercise in using different shape and size terms appropriately, if the bricks were of different shapes or sizes.

Once the teacher has decided, in the light of her syllabus, what is the point of a task like this on any particular occasion, she can see how to construct a simple or more difficult task. The fundamental variables in a task of this kind are how many objects are there, how easily they can be identified, and how complex are the relationships between them. If you keep the other variables constant, the fewer the objects involved the easier the task is. So it is easier to give instructions to build a fort with five bricks than with fifteen. It's easier if all the bricks are alike, because you don't then have to distinguish between them. If they are different, the fewer the differences the easier the task is. So you might begin, say, with just red and blue bricks. If the bricks are of ten different colours, not only does a lot more vocabulary have to be controlled, but a lot more precision is required in the locating of the different coloured bricks. Again, it is easier to refer to features which are fixed and unchanging (like colour) than

to features which are subject to change like 'the brick you used to hold the gateway up to begin with'. This brings us to relations - if you are building a fort, it is easiest to build just a solid wall because that only involves the relations 'on top of' or 'next to'. Once you start building a gateway, for instance, where you have to counter-balance bricks to bridge a gap, the spatial relationships are much more complex and much harder to specify.

Note that the areas of difficulty I am talking about here are not simply difficulties arising from 'not having enough vocabulary' or 'not having enough structures'. What we are talking about is increased conceptual difficulty. The increased difficulties will be found not only with students who are in the process of learning a foreign language, but also with students who are doing the task in their own mother tongue, where there is no question of them not controlling the relevant vocabulary or necessary syntactic structures. It is important then for the materials designer and the teacher to distinguish between a poor performance brought about by the conceptual difficulty of the task, and the poor performance brought about by lack of control of the foreign language. Typically a conceptually difficult task will require more complex language - but note that having the language won't guarantee a good performance in a difficult task. The student may be able to deploy all the vocabulary and structures needed for the difficult task in a range of easier tasks, but when faced with greater conceptual difficulty in a hard task, he may find that the language he comfortably controlled in easier tasks now eludes him - this is as true for students working in their mother tongue as for students working in a foreign language.

The type of task I have talked about so far is a static spatial layout. The sort of analysis you apply to the fort-building type of task can also be applied to a wide range of real life tasks involving manipulating objects in space - for instance laying out chairs in a classroom, arranging the furniture on a stage set, setting up a piece of equipment in a chemistry lesson, making a template in wood-work, constructing a wiring diagram, assembling machinery, laying out cards in a patience game, drawing the plan and elevation of a building. In all cases the task will be conceptually simpler if fewer objects are involved, if they are all readily identifiable and if the relationships holding between them are simple. A conceptually simpler task gives a student a chance to experience success in a task before moving on to a conceptually more difficult task.

So far I have talked of 'static' tasks where each object remains in the same position once it is placed there. A further parameter of difficulty which you can introduce is making the task DYNAMIC - introducing process into the task. In such a task the original objects no longer remain in their original places but move with

respect to each other. We now introduce temporal structure into the task, which will necessarily involve the control of language describing temporal relationships.

I shall describe dynamic tasks in terms of a type of task which we have explored extensively, the eye-witness description of an accident involving a number of vehicles where the listener has to draw up an insurance claim. Once again the fewer the objects, the easier the task - so a crash involving just two cars is a great deal easier to describe than one involving three, and we would all have difficulty, even in our own language, describing one involving five cars. Once again, the easier it is to identify the object, the easier the task. So if the objects are clearly different and can be called by clearly distinct, familiar names like 'bus', 'lorry' and 'tractor', that will be easier than describing an accident involving three identical grey cars which all have to be distinguished in terms of their relationship to the road layout (which changes), or their relationship to other cars (which also changes). We find that native speakers of English have considerable difficulty in doing such tasks even in English, simply because they do not use the past history of each vehicle in a consistent way - it is just hard to remember when you are simultaneously trying to give a complex account of changing relationships. It is absolutely inappropriate then to require such a difficult task of a student struggling with a foreign language.

You will see too that it is possible to construct a simple task in terms of spatial relationships where you have a straight road with two cars travelling in one direction and one in the other. You can then have a fairly simple temporal change where the car which is behind moves out to overtake the car in front and crashes into the car coming in the opposite direction. It is possible of course to construct much more complex spatial relationships involving T junctions, crossroads and traffic islands, with road markings and traffic lights all playing a relevant part, and much more complex temporal relationships where two different cars simultaneously, or nearly simultaneously, begin a dangerous manoeuvre.

The problem in dynamic tasks which involve a number of objects changing places with respect to each other, is keeping a clear track of which one is being talked about at a given time. The temporal structure can be made much more difficult to describe by having some of the objects reappear several times during the process or narrative or by manipulating the narrational point of view with respect to the action.

We have found that the best input for dynamic accounts is short snatches of video film - really short so as not to put too much of a burden on memory. Dynamic accounts can be given of a range of reports of accident types, crimes (pickpocketing, break-ins, bank

robberies), as well as of much more mundane reports of the way a particular machine works, how to get money out of a cash dispenser, how to make a lemon meringue pie, how to dye your hair safely, and so on. Just as REPORTS require a control of dynamic processes so do plans - how to organise one or two families getting away together on holiday, how to start up a stamp collectors' club, how to organise a sports day or a TESOL or BAAL convention. Again, I have illustrated task types with banal examples - the important point is to note the range of ordinary everyday information exchanges which can be analysed in a similar way. The same generalisations always hold - the difficulty of talking about something increases with the number of objects which have to be identified, how easy it is to identify them, and the complexity of the relationships between them.

Clearly there are other variables that could be added - relationships of causality already arise in the car crash type of task if you are asked to consider who was to blame for the accident. The task can be made more difficult for the speaker by giving him only part of the information and having him elicit other relevant information from a third party. This will be even more difficult for him if the third party's information is not absolutely compatible with his own. An analysis of many further features of different types of task could be developed.

I have talked only about the grading of tasks from the point of view of the student doing the major share of the talking. Obviously it is also possible to grade task difficulty from the point of view of the listener (see Brown forthcoming).

4 HOW TO USE GRADED TASKS

I do not want to suggest that the vast range of existing task types should be jettisoned and that we should start again from a purer, better understood base. Not at all. A very rich range of tasks is in constant use in TEFL classrooms (see for instance Littlewood 1981 or the excellent survey of tasks in Ur 1984). What I do want to suggest is that teachers should be provided with an analysis of where the conceptual problems in different task types are likely to arise. So if a teacher observes that a student has difficulty with a particular type of task, rather than simply saying 'try harder next time', or reminding him of vocabulary and structure which in some sense he already knows, the teacher can diagnose the problem the student is having, or at least narrow it down, and provide the student with some specific help. I am not suggesting either that all students should be obliged to move at the same pace through an inexorably graded syllabus. Clearly, some pairs of students may be able to progress rapidly in the foreign language to difficult tasks of the sort which will provide

difficulty for many adolescent native speakers speaking in their mother tongue. However, even highly gifted students will sometimes have problems of expression in a cognitively difficult task. If the teacher can see where the cognitively hard part of the task lies, she can help the student with the problem. Without such an analysis, she has no professional help to offer.

My particular concern in education is with providing means of helping students identified as academically less successful within the education system to perform better. In foreign language learning I believe it is often the case that such students are asked to perform tasks in the foreign language which they would have difficulty with in their own language. For such students it is essential that teachers have a clear understanding of what success in a particular task consists of; that is, an analysis which enables them to break the task down into its component parts, in a sense independently of the language which is required, and then to construct simple and intermediate versions of the same task so that students who are experiencing difficulty may make progress within a truly graded syllabus. It is time, it seems to me, that materials writers and teachers took a more professional view of this important area of methodology.

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